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AUTHOR Sommers, Jeffrey
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ABSTRACT

The student-teacher memo is a self-evaluative technique that shifts responsibility for writing development from teacher to student. Including descriptions of the intended audience, purpose, and perceived effect of a completed paper, along with specific questions the student would like the teacher/reader to answer on problems in the essay, the student memo serves as a catalyst for conferences and a focus for teacher evaluations. It also gives the teacher insight into student intent, thus encouraging the teacher to act as an editor rather than a judge. Even more importantly, the use of memos can inspire student metacognition, or reflection on his or her own writing process. Students in a freshman composition course, for example, reported considering memo questions before and during, as well as after, writing papers. Perceived by students as writing to a "real" audience with a definite purpose and as seeking specific results, the memos encourage reader-based, transactional prose. They represent one method of helping students develop their own literary voice. (MM)

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Jeffrey Sommers
1012 Vacationland Drive
Cincinnati, OH 45231

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Student-Teacher Memos:
A Collaborative Means to Student Development

Writing teachers should teach students to escape the "House of Self-Consciousness," to learn how to "lose one's mind" when writing, Barrett Mandel urges.[1] But there comes a time, however, when it becomes crucial for students to "regain their minds"--after a written draft has been completed. Susan Miller agrees when she says that writing instructors need to institute a "post-rewriting" stage to the composing process[2]; regaining one's mind during "post-rewriting" constitutes the act of metacognition, examining and reflecting on the completed cognitive process of writing a draft. What Donald Murray calls speaking to one's "other self" is another way of discussing metacognition, and, thus, when Murray recommends that writing teachers recruit the students' other selves to assist in their development as writers, he is suggesting that students engage in the act of metacognition.[3]

Because the other self is an authority on the writer's composing process, it ought to be consulted--and respected. Lil Brannon and C.H. Knoblauch have argued cogently that writing teachers must recognize the students' right to their own texts, must acknowledge their authority in speaking about what they have tried to do. Brannon and Knoblauch's main concern, however, is promoting the "transfer of responsibility [for development] from teacher to student." They conclude, "Our concern has been only secondarily to show how it can

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be done, and primarily to argue that it should be done."[4] I would like to make primary their secondary concern and present an argument for engaging students in metacognition through a method which also facilitates the shift of responsibility for writing development from teacher to student.

The best way to make contact with the students' other selves is through writing itself, and the best way to get students to provide the answers we would like to receive about how they compose is to ask them direct questions. Requiriing students to write a memorandum to the writing teacher answering specific questions about how they composed a written draft can produce the written response of the other self.* Mary H. Beaven described a similar technique several years ago, in Cooper and Odell's Evaluating Writing (NCTE, 1977), but I have seen few if any references to her comments since. She argues that "as students analyze their own creative processes and compare them with others, they begin to recognize various strategies they might try." She also argues that the use of such "self-evaluation ... promotes self-reliance, independence, autonomy, and creativity" (pp. 144, 147). However, Beaven does not argue forcefully enough for the value of this self-evaluative technique nor does she present a complete enough case for all the benefits it can bring to student writers.

I want to make that case. The metacognitive memo, or, as I call them in class, the "student-teacher memo," has a number of salutary effects which can lead to student development as writers, effects which address a number of the pressing needs of composition pedagogy. I want

* A sample of a student-teacher memo assignment sheet appears in the appendix.

to argue that the student-teacher memo assists teachers in adopting a constructive role as editor rather than judge, while guaranteeing the students' rights to their own texts. Further I want to demonstrate that, by encouraging metacognition, the student-teacher memo assists students in developing their own written voices, teaches them to write reader-based, transactional prose, and helps them to decenter. In other words, the student-teacher memo has clear benefits for both teachers and students alike.

The Teacher as Collaborator

Recent work focusing on how teachers do and should respond to student writing argues that the most effective role for the writing instructor in the process-based writing course is that of guide or fellow "explorer," or editor. What Nancy Sommers, Donald Murray, Lil Brannon and others are suggesting is that teachers begin actively collaborating with student writers rather than passively judging them. But doing so, especially for instructors who have grown used to the comfortable and powerful role of judge, can be risky and troubling. It is quite easy to feel "dumb." Walker Gibson explained how writing teachers cannot help but be "dumb" so long as they are not privy to the writer's intentions before reading the work.[5] Although that sort of "dumbness" may well be what the "real world" is like when we read--picking up a novel or a newsmagazine requires us to muddle through without knowing the writer's intentions beforehand--it is difficult

to imagine an effective editor attempting to read an author's work in such ignorance. If writing teachers are to become collaborators rather than remaining judges, they simply must have prior information about the writer's intended audience and purpose.

Recently my wife, a clinical nurse specialist in critical care nursing, sent a manuscript to her editor at one of the professional nursing journals for which she writes. She included a cover letter, part of which read as follows:

> Th section, "Assessing the organ system," could become quite cumbersome since multisystem failure can often occur with Toxic Shock Syndrome. I plan only to write a paragraph summing up the assessments needed for each system and to try to place the large body of knowledge in some type of chart or figure. Paragraph 2 is my first attempt at consolidating this information. I am interested in how well I have managed to present the information in this section.

Her focused request for editorial assistance produced the desired effect: her editor commented specifically on the very passages and strategies she had mentioned (" ... I'm especially thrilled with your multi-system assessment chart and your use of nursing diagnosis. All of these fit together very well.") Thus my wife was able to continue her writing, confident that she was on the right track for the particular audience she was addressing.

Just as my wife's letter enabled her editor to avoid being a "dumb reader" of her work, so the student-teacher memo can enable writing teachers to avoid being dumb readers of student work. As teachers have attempted to raise students' consciousness of the rhetorical situation

in any writing task by discussing the importance to the writer of audience, they have tried also to devise assignments which incorporate an imagined audience, as in the case method, so that every paper handed in is not addressed to the Teacher. But when teachers devise such assignments or when they encourage students, on their own, to select, analyze, and write to a suitable audience, they create more problems for themselves as readers: it becomes more likely that the teacher will not be the primary audience for the text. How then can teachers respond intelligently? The answer, I think, is that unless teachers find out who the writer's intended readers are and why they are being addressed, they will remain dumb readers, largely incapable of responding intelligently enough to function as either guides or collaborators.

The student-teacher memo addresses this problem by asking students to describe the audience they have selected for a given piece of writing and to explain what the purpose of writing the paper was. One student in a course entitled Literature and Composition answered these questions in this way: "My purpose in writing ... to Mr. Ionesco is to give my opinion on how he could improve his play." The play to which she refers is "The Lesson," an absurdist farce which completely befuddled her. The memo also asked her to explain whether she had considered moving any of the sections of her letter from one place to another. She responded by discussing her organizational strategy in terms of her stated purpose and audience:

> This is a letter criticising Mr. Ionesco's play and not many people take criticism very well so I wanted to be sure to say something possitive [sic]. At first I was going to write all the praise in the first paragraph and then go into my critism [sic] but I opted for mingling the two. In the first three paragraphs there is something positive said as well as negative.

A sensitive editor responding to this writer's work would not voice objection to the consistently weak praise of Ionesco which appears throughout the letter. The writer has made clear in her memo that she feels it is important for her to include "something possitive" in order to make her negative comments more palatable to the reader, Ionesco himself. Yet without this information, I suspect most instructors would be inclined to suggest that the faint though sincere praise either be strengthened or eliminated, neither of which alternative the writer is willing to do.

The student-teacher memo can further assist teachers assume the role of a collaborator in response by requiring students to compose specific questions which they want answered by their teacher/reader. The memos thus virtually force that reader into the role of collaborator, as my wife's letter did to her editor. One question among several at the end of the memo I have been citing demonstrates how this can work. The writer writes, "In para. 1, I say I liked the basic theme, in para. 2 I say some parts are funny; in para. 3, I say the end was a surprise. I think all of these are praises but if you had written this [play] would you see them or only the criticism?" This writer knows what she wants from her editor, and a question as specific as the one she has asked guarantees that she will get it.

If each teacher is to become a Maxwell Perkins to his or her student's Scott Fitzgerald, as Donald Butturff and Nancy Sommers urge,[6] then he or she must be provided with such basic information as that given in this student-teacher memo. We have all learned the dangers of commenting on any student paper during a first reading: I have written, more often than I care to remember, the comment "oops" in the margin after asking a question about the writing only to find the answer on the very next page. It may be equally dangerous to read a student paper without first reading the accompanying memo.

Being informed in this basic manner not only encourages teachers to read and respond as editors, but also protects the students' rights, what Brannon and Knoblauch call the "composer's right to make statements in the way they are made in order to say what he or she intended to say."[7] Several advocates of the conference method of teaching writing, such as Thomas Carnicelli in Donovan and McClelland's Eight Approaches to Teaching Writing (NCTE, 1980), are equally concerned with protecting students' rights by always granting them the "first say" about their work. This "right to the first say" is safeguarded by using the student-teacher memo, for the student has written the "first say" before ever turning in the work.

In short, the student-teacher memo assists teachers in adopting a productive role as readers of their students' work. Additionally, for teachers who prefer to hold conferences with students about written work, whether in brief in class or at length outside class, the student-teacher memo can serve as a catalyst for conferences. Finally, for teachers who

comment on every paper in writing or even on tape cassette, the student-teacher memo offers a focus for response and thus makes the responding process more efficient. Because students seem generally willing to respond to teaching techniques which will result in their work improving, it is not difficult to convince them of the value of the student-teacher memo in making their instructors more responsive readers of their work.[8]

The Student as Developing Writer

Earlier in this essay I referred to Donald Murray's suggestion that we enlist the assistance of the writer's other self in helping students to develop as writers. Murray suggests that perhaps "we can also help the other self to become articulate by having the student write, after completing a draft, a brief statement about the draft. That statement can be attached on the front of the draft so the teacher can hear what the other self says and respond, after reading that statement and the draft, in writing."[9] He goes on to suggest that face-to-face conferences are likely, however, to be more useful, as the teacher can "listen with the eye" in conference by observing body language, pauses, and reflection. It is, of course, possible to combine the student's written statement, which parallels in a less guided form the memos I have been describing, with an oral response by the instructor. However, Murray's central argument against this approach is that something valuable is lost if the students respond in writing rather than orally in front of the teacher.

I would like to argue the opposite: something is lost if these kinds

of response are restricted totally to oral ones. Why not, as much as possible, use writing itself to improve writing? I asked students who had used the student-teacher memos "Which question (or kind of question) on the memos proved most difficult to answer? Why?" Two responses, which were typical, are worth looking at. In one the student writes, "Why?!!! P.S. I'm not asking you why, I'm saying that was the most difficult question." The second student wrote, after circling the question "Why?" on the form, "That's the question. It is very hard to really understand one's own writing, but that question helped the most." Answering the question "Why?" in writing requires a process of discovery to occur as the students reflect on the purpose of their writing or on their composing process itself. In fact, one student wrote, "When writing the memos I would discover things about my paper that I hadn't realized." Using writing itself as a means of discovery, as Murray himself consistently and persuasively argues, is one of the true benefits of writing; the memos provide opportunities for discovery through writing to occur.

Additionally, having students write these memos addresses a related concern, one articulated recently by Murray in his response to being himself the subject of a think-aloud protocol. "I'm a bit more suspicious now than I had been about the accounts that are reconstructed in a conference days after writing. They are helpful, the best teaching point I know, but I want to find out what happens if we can bring the composing and the teaching closer together."[10] From comments written in the memos themselves as well as comments made in class, I know that students routinely

compose the memos immediately after completing the writing of a draft (usually late at night before handing in the work the next morning). The memos thus have an air of simultaneity about them because the students write about their composing process before it slips away from their short-term memory. Whether the teacher reads the memo hours after it has been written or days later becomes irrelevant since the memo serves as a permanent record of the writer's initial response; the composing and the teaching are thus brought closer together.

Because the students continue to learn more about themselves as writers over the course of a semester, the memos do not seem to wear out their welcome as the semester progresses.[11] In fact, the length of the responses on the memos generally increases. But this increased length is also a product of the collaborative relationship between writer and editor which the memos are intended to cultivate. The students begin to feel comfortable writing to the teacher, more relaxed and honest, and the memos begin to display authentic voice.

And, of course, the voiceless quality of student writing, a product of the students' lack of awareness of audience when writing, remains a major problem in freshman composition courses. The teacher is an audience, of course, but not a "real" one. "You don't write <u>to</u> teachers, you write for them. You can feel the difference vividly if you write a regular essay assigned by your teacher and then go on to write something directly <u>to</u> him: ... [like] a letter ... You will find [such] writing refreshing and satisfying compared to regular assignments--even if harder. It's a relief to put words down on paper for the sake of <u>results</u>--not just for

the sake of getting a judgment," says Peter Elbow,[12] advocating a kind of writing replicated by the student-teacher memo. In writing their memos, students become real writers writing to a real audience--the teacher/reader--with a real purpose in mind--to communicate information about how the essay being submitted came to be written. And they seek real results: useful editorial comments from their reader.

The students learn quickly that the memo is a different form of communication from the papers they are assigned. Said one student in her evaluation, "From the students' point of view it's nice to have the chance to communicate to you their feelings about the assignment, their papers' content, and why they feel the way they do about those things." The implication of such a comment is that the students begin to use the memos for their own purposes beyond the teacher's stated one of making reader response more effective; students begin to use the memos to converse with the teacher. When I asked whether the memos ought to be graded, I received an outpouring of strong negative answers (42 of 49 said "no"). "Grading the memos would defeat the purpose. It serves as a medium between you and the prof and if you grade them, then it is no longer a medium but a part of the assignment which wouldn't help in revising since your tone and attitude would change."[13]

Classroom discussion and lectures and analyses of written passages simply do not demonstrate the importance of audience as vividly as actually writing to a real audience. Instead of the writer-based prose so many freshmen write, the memos are examples of reader-based prose, true transactional writing which comes about as the students grown in

awareness of their audience.[14] One student, composing a letter, shows this increasing sense of audience, indicating her efforts to write reader-based prose. "A problem now may be that since I accept it as a letter to someone I think to myself, 'how much of this would he really want to know?'" she writes. Later in the course, this student chose to write a letter to herself in an effort, as she explained in her memo, to escape the problem of audience completely. But, since the letter was really intended to be read by others, she sadly acknowledged in the same memo that "there is no escape from audience."

What is happening to this student is that she is beginning to decenter, to move away from writing directed inward to the self and toward writing directed outward to a reader. On the evaluation questionnaire the students were asked if they had learned anything from writing the memos, and 89% answered positively. Again and again they explained that what they had learned was to look more closely at their writing, to think about how to begin revising it, to see it from a reader's point of view. "I learned what questions to ask myself as a reader and a writer" wrote one student; "I saw the paper from a reader's point-of-view," wrote another.

The comments in the memos themselves occasionally dealt with the difficulty of decentering.

> In writing this and all my papers, I've found it difficult to tell you exactly what I'm trying to say. I mean, I know what I want to say, I know what the paper says, but does someone reading know? They all seem to yet I always, always have doubts ...

This student's genuine puzzlement, expressed in one of those natural and

authentic voices I mentioned, comes across rather poignantly in his reiteration of "always," and contradicts his prior comment "they all seem to." Having these doubts, however, is a sign of progress, I believe, a sign of a writer beginning to decenter. These comments of his, by the way, were not in response to any specific question on the student-teacher memo for that assignment; he felt comfortable enough in communicating to his known audience--me--that he chose to express himself in a generalization about his entire experience during the semester.

This student's memo has something of the quality of an oral protocol to it in the way it appears to have flowed from mind to paper. The student-teacher memo in fact can be construed as an after-the-fact protocol of sorts. Many objections have been raised in the past few years to the use of protocols in research on composing, asserting that such composing aloud may well distort the composing process. However, the possibility that writing these assigned memos might affect the writing processes of our students is actually an argument in favor of using them. One student, in explaining why some questions on the memos were difficult for her to answer, wrote,

> Because I often really did know the answer--but <u>gradually</u>! I came to keep the questions in mind when I was actually writing--they became essential for 'behind the paper,' and actually began to make the writing easier--because I thought about them and made decisions before actually writing.

For this student the memos themselves became part of the recursive process of composing as she referred to the questions before, during, and after the writing. "Writing memos always got me to start thinking about a way

I should start my paper" another student wrote. Evidently, the memos can not only open a window into the writing process but can also affect that process itself. "They didn't take a lot of time but a lot of thinking," one student wrote. The product of all of this thinking, or meta-cognition as I think it may be called, is to encourage the students to see writing as a process which includes not only drafting but also pre-writing and re-writing.[15]

But there remains one point about the memos which needs to be made explicitly: they require students to think of themselves not so much as students but as writers. Real writers ask their editors for specific assistance just as the students do in their memos or just as my wife did in her letter to her editor. By asking our students to do the same thing, we reinforce the idea that they are writers, fledgling writers perhaps, but writers nonetheless. In fact, all of the memo questions, those which probe the composing process as well as those which ask for self-evaluation of the completed draft, are based upon an unspoken assumption: the students are truly writers, writers whose writing is serious in its intention to communicate. The students' written assignments are not treated as exercises intended to demonstrate certain stylistic devices; they are treated instead as proposed solutions to problems presented by rhetorical situations. By asking the students to consider what they have done as they attempted to solve the rhetorical problems which they had posed for themselves, writing teachers imply that the students <u>are</u> writers. Not only in our explicitly hortatory and supportive responses to student writing, but also in the implicit assumptions

we make about our classes when we assign these memos, we encourage every student's "complex, internal growth into the character of an Author" as Susan Miller phrases it.[16] We, in fact, begin to treat them as writers rather than as students, and they thus become more willing to act like writers.

Conclusion

A study which investigated what student writers really learn[17] concluded that students acquire an ability to read their own work critically before they acquire the skills necessary to implement revision based on that critical reading. The researcher argued that making students more aware of their composing processes does help them develop as writers even though they cannot always demonstrate their development immediately when they write. What this researcher has described is the value of metacognition, of looking back into the process which led to a completed draft and reflecting on it. It is this process of inquiring and reflecting which I suggest constitutes the essential value of the student-teacher memo. All of the other benefits for which I have argued grow out of increasing the students' awareness of the composing process.

The memos simply ask the students to do what we do when we write: use the composing process to our own advantage so that we can achieve our purpose in communicating to the specific audience we have in mind as we write. The memos encourage students to think about their readers

and to communicate with their most present reader--the teacher. And by doing all of these things, the memos help lead to the writing of reader-based, transactional prose, articulated in an authentic voice. In a surprised tone, one student wrote me in a memo, "Sometimes I think these memos help me as much as they help you." In other words, the student-teacher memo has allowed this student, and others like her, to take over much of the responsibility for her own development as a writer. I find that an utterly compelling argument for using this approach to introducing metacognition into the composition classroom.

Notes

[1] Barrett J. Mandel, "The Writer Writing Is Not at Home," College Composition and Communication, 31 (1980), 375.

[2] Susan Miller, "How Writers Evaluate Their Own Writing," College Composition and Communication, 33 (1982), 182.

[3] Donald M. Murray, "Teaching the Other Self: The Writer's First Reader," College Composition and Communication, 33 (1982), 141ff.

[4] Lil Brannon and C.H. Knoblauch, "On Students' Rights to Their Own Texts: A Model of Teacher Response," College Composition and Communication, 33 (1982), 165.

[5] Walker Gibson, "The Writing Teacher as Dumb Reader," College Composition and Communication, 30 (1979), 192.

[6] Douglas Butturff and Nancy I. Sommers, "Placing Revision in a Reinvented Rhetorical Tradition" in Reinventing Rhetorical Tradition ed. Aviva Freedman and Ian Pringle (Conway, Ark.: L and S Books, 1980), p. 104.

[7] Brannon and Knoblauch, p. 165.

[8] In the classes in which I have these memos, I have asked students to complete an evaluation questionnaire about the memos at the end of the course. To the question "Is the writing of these memos useful enough to justify continuing the practice in future composition classes?" 46 of 49 students responded "yes."

[9] Murray, "Teaching the Other Self," p. 146.

[10] Donald M. Murray, "Response of a Laboratory Rat--or, Being Protocoled," College Composition and Communication, 34 (1983), 170.

[11] To the question "Did you enjoy writing the memos?" 61% said "yes."

[12] Peter Elbow, Writing with Power (New York: Oxford University Press, 1981), p. 220.

[13] Another student bluntly wrote, "Should you grade conversation? Basically the memos were a personal contact between student and teacher. I could also ask you, 'Should I grade your response to my paper?'"

[14] One "audience-related activity" identified by Carol Berkenkotter in her work in protocol analysis was "directly addressing audience in text." ["Understanding a Writer's Awareness of Audience," College Composition and Communication, 32 (1981), 398-9]. These memos rather than using "you" as a substitute for an indefinite pronoun, generally use "you" to refer to the reader, as can be observed in the quoted excerpts from memos in this article.

[15] To the question "Did the memos help you in revising later on?" 75% of the students responded "yes."

[16] Miller, p. 182.

[17] Donnalee Rubin, "Evaluating Freshmen Writers: What Do Students Really Learn?" College English, 45 (1983), 373-379.

APPENDIX

MEMO ASSIGNMENT #1

As I explained on the syllabus, each writing assignment this semester will also ask you to compose a memo to me in which you respond to several questions about the writing of the assignment itself. When you have completed your first essay (the letter to the short story writer) and feel ready to hand it in along with your tape cassette for me to respond to, you have one final task! You need to complete a memo for me. Remember--this memo will not be graded. You may choose to answer each question in separate paragraphs, or you may choose to write a comprehensive answer in the form of a single long paragraph. The choice is yours.

If you take these memos seriously and write honestly about what you have experienced in writing the assigned papers, you can help me to comment more usefully on your papers. I think you will also learn more about your own writing practices through writing me these memos (which is one reason why I'd like you to save them--so that you can look at them as the semester progresses.)

So--relax, your paper is completed! Now, write me a memo in which you respond to the following four questions:

1. Is there any part of your essay which you can trace back to your journal? If so, which part(s)?

2. What part of this essay is the most successful or best part?

3. Which part(s) do you think will need revision? What, in particular, do you want me to comment on?

4. Show me a passage which you would have written differently if you were writing an essay for a teacher instead of a letter to an author. What would be different?

You may, of course, also comment on anything else about the essay or the assignment if you wish. This memo should be handed in with the completed essay #1 in your folder. Please label it as Memo #1 with your name at the top.